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HIGH-SCHOOL DRAMATICS

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We Americans claim that our nation knows how to work: social students are now asserting that a present national problem, far reaching for rich and poor alike, is the learning how to play, the profitable use of leisure time. The "left-over" part of the bread-earner's shortened day, as well as the squandered hours of the unemployed, can no longer be disregarded. Romans laughed at brute sport and tortured Christians; Athenians crowded to see their poets and athletes crowned with laurel. For its people's amusement, America offers sports, dance-halls, country parks, motion pictures, theatres. Most of these are simply commercial enterprises, whose one aim is to attract the crowd, but still these recreations fill the present emergency in our national "play-time," and constantly demand choice. One means for guiding this choice is suggested by the fact that, in our high schools throughout the land, dramatics of some sort has a part in the year's program. The object of this paper is two fold: to make a simple plea for the realization of the opportunity each high school holds in the selection of the "next play"; and to call attention to possible methods of surmounting certain common difficulties.

The opportunity is difficult to measure. Two weeks ago, one of our senior girls, at the close of her senior play, sighed regretfully, with wonder-shining eyes, "How short this evening has been and how long I've looked forward to it! Why are good times so soon over?" Yes, short in duration, but

long in anticipation, and longer still in memory. growing into the sub-conscious self, this craving for pleasure becomes to grown-ups the goal for which they spend their substance, or drag through the weariness of the task; to children, it is both the fore-ground and background of their daily grind. Especially among high-school students, a seemingly impassible gulf lies between the class-room text-book and the joy of living. Is it not worth while for the faculty to attempt to bridge that space, and, at the same time, to teach the pupils, each with a life to live, that there is such a thing as choice in pleasure seeking? Certainly it might be, if there were not (Indicative mood of fact) punctuation, grammar, the classics, college examinations, business English set us as our work which we are paid to teach. It is true, however, that, in spite of ourselves, we are doing one thing more which bears directly on pleasure training. Investigation shows that in Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Washington, and many of our New England towns, large and small, each year the high schools give one or more plays. In some, only the best is used; from many comes the complaint that it is so difficult to find anything but trash that little is gained by the performances. Think of the thousands upon thousands of high-school children, each one unconsciously carrying away whatever standard the school may set for play as well as work. Surely we cannot escape responsibility in the solving of our nation's "leisure-time" problem.

Besides this unconscious influence our dramatics have upon students after graduation, there is also the actual part which it takes in the present school life. In an attempt to gain the student stand-point of the worth of high-school dramatics, several classes in different schools were asked to discuss the disadvantages and advantages, and one girl edited the frank opinions collected. "One and all agreed that, properly managed, plays are a distinct advantage to the school." The following paragraphs are an honest plea for that which we might regard carelessly.

"There are many advantages which the high-school dramatics offer to the school itself, to the pupils, and to outsiders. In most schools boys and girls are both much interested in the athletics, but in many ordinary sized schools the money to support the teams must be raised by the pupils to some extent. What better way can there be than to give plays for this purpose? All the boys in our school, I know, mention this the very first on the list of advantages of the dramatics, this good way of helping to support the teams.

"And does not this very task of raising money for the athletics bring about the one thing most earnestly desired in every school, school-spirit. Yes, this is the greatest opportunity offered for all the pupils to work together for a common cause, and that cause is their own school. They must all work together and make it a success, not only to raise money, but to have out-siders enjoy it, and give them the best possible impression of the school. *There ought to be a chance, if the play is managed properly, for everyone to have something to do,* for there are tickets to sell, the music to prepare, and committees to work on, besides the regular rehearsing and acting. If the plays are talked about in school, and pupils' interest is aroused, they are going to be one of the greatest factors in making the school united and loyal. Now another benefit is the effect which good plays have upon the standard of the school. If a successful play is given, out-siders immediately take more interest, and a much better impression is given of the school than in any other way.

"Naturally the pupils are the first to see the many advantages for themselves which are gained from the plays. They think that plays teach them many valuable lessons, the first of which is self-confidence. In class work, in athletics, and in social life at school, self-confidence is always needed, and without it no pupil, however clever, can be successful. To be able to get upon the stage and act a part in a play, requires self-confidence to a great extent. Yet this is only one of many things that acting calls for. One must be natural, unaffected, and absolutely unconscious of oneself, and at the same time have perfect confidence in one's power to carry out the part. Are not these valuable lessons to learn, and will they not be of great benefit to pupils in their school life, and perhaps afterward? Then there is other good training in amateur acting, such as learning to speak clearly, accurately, and in good form. *If the play is the right kind,* it gives a fine chance to improve one's English for it is good training to memorize a part in any fine play.

"Next comes the advantage which offers fun, companionship, and wholesome amusement at rehearsals. The fun of going, of watching and laughing at the others, and of being all together, more than pays for all the scoldings, cross words, and discouraging times when people can't seem to learn their parts. The fun of the dress rehearsal, the performances, the receiving of flowers, and the praise of friends, all go toward making a very pleasant memory of school life. There is one more benefit to the pupil, which appeals to some particularly, and that is the chance of becoming better known at school and outside, by taking a prominent part in the play. There are some boys who can't go in for athletics, and girls who have never been especially popular, who enjoy being in a play more than anything else because they get better acquainted and so have a happier time. There is no doubt that all the boys and girls enjoy the plays immensely, and at the same time feel that they are gaining something worth while from them.

"Again, the plays are a help because they interest outsiders. People are always willing to help a good cause, and if the plays are interesting and enjoyable, they will be only too glad to help to support the athletic teams. Of course, many of them are interested in certain pupils, relatives or friends perhaps, and come only to see them, but they will soon discover that there are others worth seeing, that the plays are good, and that the school is worthy

of help. The audience will find that there is talent in some of the actors, and the latter will become better known than before. Altogether, the plays will bring the people of the town or city into closer contact with the school, and there will result the co-operation of the parents and friends with the teachers and pupils."

When we review these gains which the children themselves find in this so-called incidental of school life, an attitude of unconcern recalls the parable, "And I was afraid and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, thou hast that is thine."

There are, however, valid reasons for fear in attempting high-school dramatics. Drain on the student's over-crowded time, extra strain on busy faculty, plays unsuitable for use, are practical objections which, without discussion, will be acknowledged by anyone who has been behind the scenes of the majority of school plays. Yet, if the play life of our nation may be profited, if the students' days themselves are enriched, it would be worth while to examine these objections, and find means for surmounting these common difficulties. The second aim of this paper is to present certain methods gathered from teachers who have been successful in making good their opportunity in dramatics in our high schools.

First, the over-crowded time of the student seems to have been solved best by systematic, business-like treatment. In one large school, a literary club manages the plays. The work is begun early in the year, and the rehearsals are pledged in advance. In a smaller school where such an organization might not be feasible, everyone who may is given a chance to try for the parts. In this way, new actors may appear, and no one can be justly jealous of the one chosen.

Often, by this competition unsuspected talent is brought out and the "over-taxed" person is relieved.

Another efficiency plan comes from a Wellesley graduate in St. Joseph, Missouri. All this work is outside of the English department. She has two dramatic clubs in the school, staging one play a year with each group. Her results speak best for themselves.

"I never let anything go on trial till it is as perfect as time and ability will make it. We have a reputation established, and the girls from year to year strive to add to it. With the standards given by Wellesley to her daughters, I am a severe critic, and the girls know that they will have to work long and well or I shall not let them take the privilege of giving a play. And how they love to give plays! So you see I have them—result, big houses, pleased audiences."

The enthusiasm of this report recalls the second obstacle, extra strain on busy faculty on whom the inspiration for the whole performance depends. Here again to the faculty, as to the students, systematic, timely, planning is of much help. Often-times the over-strain comes from the attempt to place all the responsibility on one or two members of the faculty, or always on the theme-laden English teachers. In a New Hampshire school, the teacher of Mathematics has charge; in a Vermont town, the Physical Culture teacher does the drilling. Of course, there must be a leader, but, often, the leader may assume more of the actual task than is necessary. The faculty as well as the students, enjoy being "in things," and a division of labor brings gain at more than one point. Perhaps this scattering of the coaching duties will not make so discouraging a Harvard professor's claim that the failures of our high-school plays are largely due to inefficiency on the part of the coach. This professor demands three qualities: enthusiastic love for coaching drill; an ability to choose actors, implying keen judgment of the possibilities of human nature; and the knowledge for the selection of a play of literary as well as dramatic value. Certainly it would be difficult to find all these in the ordinary high-school teacher, yet many a teaching group might furnish the combination. For the drill work, often it is possible to find some one outside of the school, and thus much of the burden is shifted. The second requirement, ability to choose players, principally needs practice, and power to see the point of view of the audience as well as that of the actor. Several schools where the seniors give the yearly play, report that watch is kept in the lower classes for students who show any dramatic interest, and they are tested in the class-room reading. "Dramatization" by Simons-Orr gives selections from our English classics read at present in high schools, adapted to just such testing. The insistence, however, on the third necessity, dramatic knowledge, does seem at first thought insurmountable to the green college girl or the older teacher of even average brain equipment. It may be a simple matter to distinguish the "acting" plays from the "conversation" and "reading" plays: there still remains that artistic recognition of the picture effects to say nothing of the "mechanics" of the make-up, stage-setting, and finish in the details. Anyone who has been forced to rely simply on common sense for these necessities, will welcome the practical information in "Reading in Public Schools" by Briggs and Coffman. This book was written for use in Grammar

Schools, but Chapter XXVI on "Dramatics," contains thoroughly useful suggestions for the essentials in staging a play. The authors of this text book gives also a list of tried plays; the quoted paragraphs will show the type of plays chosen.

"The selection of a good play — a play that is clean, of the proper subject and length, demanding such proportion of boys and girls as the class affords, and interesting, is sometimes an insuperable obstacle." In their list, they do not include shows written merely for "attracting a crowd and raising a laugh. "Each play has reading merit and is studied during school time." If a play is not worth school time, it is probably not worth giving at all. Most of these plays have been included in the list at the close of this paper.

Just at this point of choice of the "next-play" is the vital failure of our school dramatics so far as its part in the solving of our national recreation problem is concerned. In one way or another, the cast finish their school course, and the faculty continue to teach, but, time after time, coarse, silly plays are given, under protest, to be sure, but still used. The reason is obvious to anyone who has toiled through page after page of modern farce offered by dramatic publishing houses, or watched the performances of the more ambitious amateur clubs. Neither trash nor problem plays are furnishing a high standard for our school people to take away with them. One means of escape has been found by ingenious teachers and clever pupils in the writing of their own plays. Last year in Newton, Worcester, and in Burlington, Vermont, merited success was gained by high-school authors. John Farrar, '14, of Burlington, wrote, "The Spirit of Youth," a morality play in which Puerus represents the character of any youth. In the competition of dramatic writing, the Newton English Club choose "Checkmate," a comedy by William Prosser. This year Newton, Browne-Nichols, and Roxbury Latin all present original plays. For the majority, however, such results would not be possible. One teacher makes a plea for the "classics" done roughly rather than the usual perpetrations. Shakespeare, Goldsmith, Sheridan have been given in our larger schools and made popular where an outside coach of ability could be had. There are also the Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas for places where the musical director has dramatic as well as musical skill. Two operas by these last two writers were given by the School Glee Club. Of course, the boys' costumes had to be hired, but each girl made her

own in such a way that it could be used as an evening dress afterward. The director assigned the individual colors, and the result was beautiful as well as practical. In a most suggestive discussion of "Problems of the High School Play,"* F. H. Guild of the University of Illinois, sums up the necessities of choice. "First of all, it must entertain; it must give unforced pleasure to the audience. But this is never inconsistent with the other aim, to give the actors something worth doing, to develop ability, to rouse interest in the best, to benefit school and community may also be well worth doing, an opportunity to be welcomed.

* Published by "The Illinois Association of Teachers of English Bulletin for April 1st, 1913. An excellent help in play presentation.

LIST OF PLAYS

A selected list of plays taken from "Reading in Public Schools" by Briggs and Coffman. Row, Peterson & Co., Chicago.

Longfellow, H. W.: *Hiawatha*, dramatized by Florence Holbrook. Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston. Price, 15 cents.

Carroll, Lewis: *Alice in Wonderland*, dramatized by Mrs. Burton Harrison; a play in three acts, with tableaux, songs and dances. The Dramatic Publishing Co., Chicago. Price, 25 cents.

Thirty-odd characters, most of whom may be either male or female; settings, two exteriors and one interior; costumes, fanciful, as demanded by the story; time, a short evening. This is an excellent dramatization of the well-known story. It may be altered in many minor ways to suit conditions.

Smith, S. D.: *Jack and Jill*, founded on parts of the story by Louisa M. Alcott. *Ladies' Home Journal*, December, 1906.

Seven male, eight female characters (more if desired); setting, easily arranged; costumes, ordinary; time, thirty minutes.

Burnett, Frances H.: *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, a drama in three acts, founded on the story. Samuel French, New York. 25 cents. Permission must be obtained from the publisher before this play may be used; charges, \$15.

Nine male, three female characters; setting, interiors; costumes, various, as demanded by the story; time, a full evening. This is rather an ambitious play for a school to attempt.

Guild, T. H.: *The Clancy Kids*, a comedy in two acts. Walter H. Baker & Co., Boston. Price, 15 cents.

No male, eighteen female characters; setting, a garden and adjoining backyard; costumes, everyday; time, about an hour. A simple, wholesome play, in which one set of children show some others how to amuse themselves. A part of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is introduced.

Merington, Marguerite: The "Cranford" Play in three acts, adapted from Elizabeth Gaskell's novel. Duffield & Co., New York; also in the Ladies' Home Journal, February, 1901. Price, \$1.25. Permission may be had to use this play.

One male, nine female characters; setting, a room; costumes, old-fashioned but easily arranged; time, a short evening.

Tennyson, Alfred: The Princess, recast as a drama in five acts.

Walter H. Baker & Co., Boston. Price, 15 cents.

Eight male, four female characters, besides as many male and female students, heralds, etc., as desired; settings, interiors and exteriors; costumes, various, almost demanding the services of a costumer; time, a full evening. This adaptation is very good, using the words of the poem throughout. It may be given simply in the classroom after studying the poem, or it may be presented somewhat elaborately at the theatre.

Rostand, E.: The Romancers, Walter H. Baker & Co., Boston; paper, 25 cents. Doubleday, Page & Co., New York; cloth, 50 cents.

Five male, one female character, and several bandits; setting, a garden; costumes, pretty; time, a short evening. This is a beautiful out-of-door play, demanding first of all beauty of setting and costumes. It can be given indoors.

Phipps, Edmund: King Rene's Daughter, a lyric drama in one act.

Samuel French, New York. Price, 15 cents.

Six male, three female characters; setting, garden and exterior of a house; costumes, rich; time, about one hour. This play is in verse. It has a pretty sentiment and may be made very beautiful.

Gilbert, W. S.: Original Plays. Chatto & Windus, London. Price, three volumes, \$3.00.

Several of Gilbert's clever plays—Pygmalion and Galatea, The Palace of Truth, Engaged, ec.,—have long been popular with amateurs. They are full of the same wit that permeates the Gilbert and Sullivan operas.

Goldsmith, Oliver: She Stoops to Conquer. Published in many editions.

Six male, four female characters, and attendants; for the setting a stage is required; the costumes should be had from a costumer; time, a full evening. Suitable for an ambitious commencement play of a high school.

Sheridan, Richard B.: The Rivals, and The School for Scandal.

Published in many editions.

These two plays are suitable for the commencement plays of a high school when a good director is willing to undertake so much.

Dickens, Charles: The Holly Tree Inn, a play in one act, adapted by Mrs. Beringer. Samuel French, New York. Price, 25 cents.

Permission must be obtained from the publisher before this play may be used. Charges, \$5.00.

Four male (the boy's part sometimes taken by a girl), three female characters; setting, a room; costumes, everyday; time, forty-five minutes. A splendid adaptation of Dickens's well-known story.

Dickens, Charles: *The Cricket on the Hearth*, in three acts. W. H. Baker & Co., Boston. Price, 15 cents.

Six male, seven female characters; setting, easily arranged; time, two hours.

Dickens, Charles: Sketches from his works. The following four books are published by Walter H. Baker & Co., Boston:

Bardell vs. Pickwick, in one act. Price, 15 cents.

Six male, two female characters; setting, a court room; costumes, modern; time, thirty minutes.

Comic Dialogues from Dickens. Price, 25 cents.

There are sixteen selections from the *Pickwick Papers*, nine from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, seven from *Old Curiosity Shop*, and others from *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Great Expectations*, etc., all given in the words of Dickens.

Holiday Dialogues from Dickens. Price, 25 cents.

These selections from *The Christmas Carol*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *The Battle of Life*, etc., are especially good for Christmas time.

Humorous Dialogues from Dickens. Price, 25 cents.

These sketches use Dickens's own words. They are taken from *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Dombey & Son*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *The Pickwick Papers*, etc.

Little Em'ly, a dramatization of *David Copperfield*, in four acts.

The Dramatic Publishing Co., Chicago. Price, 15 cents.

Characters, eight male, eight female; settings, interiors and exteriors; costumes, exaggerated modern; time, a full evening.

Morton, J. M.: *Lend Me Five Shillings*, a farce in one act. *Dramatic Publishing Co.*, Chicago. Price, 15 cents.

Five male, two female characters, plus ladies and gentlemen; setting, a room; costumes, fancy evening; time, forty-five minutes. An old favorite on the stage.

Shakespeare, William: Following are the plays that are usually presented by amateurs. They should hardly be undertaken, however, without an experienced leader in charge: *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Sometimes only the fairy scenes or the clown scenes are given from the last named play.

There are many cuttings from the plays. Two suitable for school presentation are listed:

Much Ado About Nothing, arranged in two acts. W. H. Baker & Co., Boston. Price, 15 cents.

Eight male, three female characters; setting, an easy exterior; costumes, adapted; time, one hour. The cutting is free from objectionable incidents and passages.

Julius Caesar, arranged in two acts. W. H. Baker & Co., Boston. Price, 15 cents.

Ten male, no female characters; setting, the forum; costumes, Roman; time, one hour. The cutting is to make the play easier for presentation.

Gaylev. C. M., adapter: The Star of Bethlehem, a miracle play of the Nativity. Duffield & Co., New York. Price, \$1.25. Permission must be obtained to present this play.

Ten male, three female characters, besides counsellors, etc.; settings easily arranged; costumes, ancient; time, a short evening. This is a Christmas play adapted from the Townsley and other old English cycles for the Ben Greet players. It would add great interest to any study of the drama before Shakespeare.

Anon: Everyman, a moral play. Duffield & Co., New York. Price, \$1.00.

Could only be used by class who has studied drama under a scholar.

The catalogues of the following firms, which will be mailed free on request, contain most of the plays commonly used by amateurs: Walter H. Baker & Co., 5 Hamilton Pl., Boston; The Dramatic Publishing Co., Pontiac Bldg., Chicago; Samuel French, 28 W. 38th St., New York; Penn Publishing Co., 923 Arch St., Philadelphia; The Eldridge Entertainment House, Franklin, Ohio.

Other suggestions may be found in "A Selected List of Plays for Amateurs" by Elizabeth A. McFadden and Lilian E. Davis. This may be purchased for \$2.06 at 113 Lakeview Ave., Cambridge, Mass. In Cambridge, (41 Concord Ave.) is the "Agency for Unpublished Plays" which will give a list of pieces which may be had in manuscript for a small royalty. T. H. Guild of the University of Illinois suggests "The Stage Guild of Chicago" as printing interesting plays and pageants by T. W. Stevens and others. The Drama League of Boston (101 Tremont Street) is glad to send, at request, lists of new plays and criticisms.



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